

# Oral Health and Tobacco Use

## ***What is periodontitis and who gets it?***

Anyone can develop periodontitis but tobacco use is one of the most significant risk factors in the development of periodontitis. Our mouths are full of bacteria; the bacteria forms plaque on teeth. The plaque hardens forming calculus. If the calculus is not removed during a professional cleaning, and it remains below the gum line, the bacteria in the calculus can destroy gum tissue and cause gums to pull away from teeth. When this happens, periodontal pockets form and fill with disease-causing bacteria. If left untreated, the pockets between teeth and gums grow deeper, allowing more bacteria in that destroy tissue and supporting bone. Without treatment, the teeth may become loose, painful, and even fall out.

## ***How do cigarettes trigger periodontitis?***

Smokers are at between two and a half and six times greater risk of periodontal disease compared with non-smokers. This may be because smoking affects the immune system by lowering the body's ability to inhibit bacteria that are associated with periodontal disease. Smoking interferes with healing reducing the delivery of oxygen and nutrients to gingival tissue. This makes smokers more likely to not respond to treatment and to loose teeth.

## ***Can cancer develop in the mouth?***

Yes, in the United States, 30,000 people are diagnosed with mouth and throat cancer each year; 8,000 die of these cancers. Mouth and throat cancers are the sixth most common cancers in U.S. males and the fourth most common in African American men. Only one half the number of people diagnosed with oral cancer are still living five years after diagnosis. Approximately 75 percent of oral cavity and pharyngeal cancers are attributed to the use of smoked and smokeless tobacco.

Those who chew tobacco are at high risk for gum and cheek lesions that can lead to cancer. Smokeless tobacco contains 28 cancer-causing agents and is not a safe substitute for smoking cigarettes. Cigarettes contain a minimum of 46 known carcinogens.

## ***What are some of the signs or symptoms of oral cancer?***

- A mouth sore that fails to heal or that bleeds easily
- A white or red patch in the mouth that will not go away
- A lump, thickening or soreness in the mouth, throat, or tongue
- Difficulty chewing or swallowing food.

Most early signs of oral cancer are painless and are difficult to detect without a thorough head and neck examination. Detection of oral cancer through periodic medical and dental examinations can significantly reduce the risk of these life-threatening cancers.

## ***What should I do?***

- First and foremost, stop using tobacco products. For information about tobacco cessation, call the 1-800-QUIT-NOW help line. You can also contact the tobacco coordinator at your local health department for programs near you.
- Visit your health care or dental care professional. Talk with them about your oral health concerns.
- Resolve to live a healthier lifestyle. Don't use tobacco, provide your body daily with the healthy nutrients it needs to function efficiently, and adopt a regimen to incorporate physical activity into your life most days of the week. Consult your medical and dental health care professional at least annually.



**1-800-QUIT NOW**